

Educational Challenges and Expectancy of Non-governmental Education Leaders in Armed Conflict Areas in Myanmar

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Abstract

Myanmar is a country with long-term internal conflict with many ethnic minority children suffering from the lack of access to quality education. To solve the issue, non-governmental schools have been built in armed conflict areas. However, the schools are dealing with many challenges such as lack of resources or threat to security. At present, there is a knowledge gap in the practices of non-governmental school leaders in tackling the challenges and their expectancy to provide quality education to their students. Therefore, this study explored the educational challenges and expectancy of non-governmental leaders from Kachin State and Shan State in Myanmar through interviews to assist policy makers and other stakeholders in crafting inclusive education in the country. There are three major parts in the findings: challenges, overcoming methods, and the opportunities the leaders are seeking. The findings suggest the urgent need of cooperation between the government and ethnic armed organisations on the education of the children, changes in national curriculum, and teacher education. Due to the sample size of this qualitative study, the findings may not be generalised for all the ethnic groups in Myanmar. However, they can help policy makers and other stakeholders with policies for inclusive education as they reflect the real life experience of those working in education sector in armed conflict areas.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, education challenges and expectancy of non-governmental leaders, ethnic minority, armed-conflict Myanmar, non-governmental schools*

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1. Introduction

As globalisation has made the world more connected, the greater demand on knowledge and technology advancement is required for all the countries around the world challenging their education systems, and reminding educational preparedness for the next generations. In addition, development of a country is closely related to its education (Bhola, 2006; Farooq & Kai, 2016; Meyerhof, 2016) as education is directly connected to human resource development, which is vital to assure the socio-economic and political development of a country for sustainable development (Oghenekohwo & Frank-Oputu, 2017). Therefore, access to quality education has become a fundamental human right (United Nations, 1949), which can also improve the quality of lives assuring "human rights and dignity, social justice, inclusion, protection, cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 7). It also assists in eradicating poverty, encouraging economic development promoting gender equality, "health, and the inclusion of persons with disabilities" (p.27). Eventually, quality education can also bring peace and stability to the areas struggling with different types of conflicts (UNICEF, 2016). Hence, education plays the most significant role for the countries, including those with long-term conflicts like Myanmar, not only for the ease of current conflicts but also for the development of the younger generations.

In Myanmar, the ongoing civil war since 1949, the year after the independence, made quality education not yet accessible for all the students. The civil war started due to political and economic resources, justice and equality among the ethnic groups (South & Lall, 2016). According to Nyein (2019), there are at least 53 ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and most of them are based in States with the names of ethnicities, most of which are sharing borders with neighbouring countries, such as Thailand, China, Bangladesh and India. It has also highlighted that the number of internally displaced persons is more than 200,000 and the number is continuously increasing as the civil war goes on. The civil war affected areas are Kachin State, Shan State, Kayah State, Kayah State and Rakhine State, all of which are sharing borders with at least one of their neighbouring countries. As the armed conflicts continued, non-governmental schools have been established in armed conflicts areas by the EAOs and civic society organisations (CSOs) (Lwin, 2019). Most of the schools are in the remote areas and in the camps for internally displaced persons in the border areas. As a result, there are many challenges students faced in the armed conflict areas such as lack of physical

infrastructure, lack of security, lack of academic resources and lack of inclusive policy at national level (Bigagli, 2019; Hong, 2021; Lall, 2020; Lwin, 2021; Oh et al., 2019; Wong, 2019). Despite the challenges of the schools and the students had been identified by the previous studies, there is very limited literature which reflects the actual expectation of the education leaders managing the non-governmental schools in armed conflict areas in Myanmar. Hence, this study was conducted to explore the expectations of the education leaders in armed conflict areas in Myanmar.

In education leadership and management, the role of the context plays a vital role. One leadership style to overcome a particular challenge in one context may not be effective in another context (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). Thus, it is crucial to apply relevant approaches of leadership to successfully overcome a particular challenge and imagine a way forward (Thomson et al., 2014). Therefore, this study was conducted to fill the gap of the knowledge domain in this study area. In this study, two education leaders, one principal from a self-help high school from Kachin State and one program manager working in an education organisation in Shan State, were interviewed to find out their expectations and the possible solutions to overcome the challenges in the armed conflict areas in Myanmar. Thus, the researchers, the policy makers, and international institutions can contribute to enhance the access of the students in armed conflict areas in Myanmar to quality education, which will assist the development of the country in the future.

2. Literature Review

Myanmar, a country in South-east Asia neighbouring with Thailand, Laos, China, India and Bangladesh, is suffering from a civil war of more than 70 years, holding at least 53 ethnic armed organisations. There are more than one hundred different ethnicities, speaking different languages (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, n.d.). Despite Myanmar, also known as Burmese, is the official language of Myanmar, it is not the common language in the areas of ethnic minorities near the border of the country.

Along with the decades of civil war, many different types of non-governmental schools have emerged besides government schools such as "self-help schools, monastery-based schools, church-based schools, the schools run by ethnic armed organizations and schools in refugee camps" (Lwin, 2019, p. 275). Some of them use the government curriculum with some

adjustments while others use their own curriculums using their own language or blending their own language and Burmese, the official language of Myanmar. As it is very common that armed conflicts have adverse impacts on the education process of school children (Berker, 2014; Davis, 2010; Merrouche, 2011; Shanks, 2019), the children from Myanmar also have been suffering from the consequences of the civil war. The common education challenges of the students in armed conflict areas found in literature can be categorised into themes such as physical infrastructure, security, resources, and policy and management.

The first challenge the students have to deal with is the physical barriers in accessing education. Students may also face challenges such as lack of learning materials like textbooks, and classroom facilities like desks and chairs (Asia News Monitor, 2020; Lall, 2020; Lwin, 2021; Pechdina & Ahmad, 2022). In some areas, however, militant groups themselves create education opportunities for the students in their controlled territory. For instance, Lwin (2019) has identified that "ethnic armed organizations" in Myanmar have established schools in the jungle, which is their controlled territory. The type of schools can range from primary schools to college levels. Moreover, because of the location of the schools and lack of required facilities, the students have to struggle with their studies, for example studying in very wet places (Asia News Monitor, 2016).

Another adverse impact of armed conflicts on education is lack of security. For example, civilians in Myanmar were injured by artillery shells, the responsibility for which was denied by both sides, Myanmar military and an EAO (Irrawaddy, 2019). Another threat that prevents children from going to school is the landmine issue. As landmines prevent the children from physically accessing the class blocking the roads to schools (Asia News Monitor, 2019; Merrouche, 2011, p. 402), which is one of the reasons the children leave schools.

On the other hand, there is also a pressing issue on the lack of supportive policy and management (Lwin, 2021; South & Lall, 2016; Wong, 2019). Shanks (2019) argues that the relationship between "education policy" and "the dynamics of a conflict" is important (p.34), however "[c]ontextualization of education policy" is often ignored in conflict impact areas (p.43). Myanmar's National Education Strategic Plan was created by the central government without consultation with ethnic minorities within the country. As a result, it does not meet the needs of the ethnic minority students and it fails to recognise the inclusion of the students studying at the non-governmental schools in armed conflicts areas (Lwin, 2019). This brings

challenges to the non-governmental school leaders to assure their students the access to quality education during and after their high school education.

Similarly, one of the significant issues the non-governmental leaders are dealing with is the lack of inclusive language policy for the ethnic minorities. Despite teaching some ethnic languages is allowed as an extra curriculum activity, the major subjects like mathematics, science and geography for the primary and middle school students are written in Burmese, which ethnic students do not understand. While the national education policy and its amendment fail to recognise the fact and it has become an enormous challenge to the education leader in managing their schools, the Myanmar National Education law and its amendment also fail to recognise the education of the students from non-governmental schools from armed conflict areas and neglect the rights of the students to continue their higher education after their graduations from the non-governmental schools (Lwin, 2019). As a result, students in IDP camps cannot join the government higher education institutions and are unable to continue their higher education (Yeo et al., 2020, p. 44). Since no pathway procedure to higher education for the non-governmental high school graduates, this also has become a suffocating barrier for the non-governmental school leaders from armed conflict areas.

While the educational challenges of the students in armed conflict areas are available in the literature, there are limited literature that provide suggestions or recommendations that may assist the education leaders in armed conflict areas in the context of Myanmar. Since the role of the context plays a vital role in education leadership and management, it is crucial to understand the relevant approaches of leadership to successfully overcome a particular challenge and imagine a way forward (Thomson et al., 2014). Therefore, two education leaders, one principal from a self-help high school from Kachin State and one program manager working in an education organisation in Shan State, were interviewed to find out possible solutions to overcome the challenges and their expectations to enhance the access of the children in armed conflict areas in Myanmar to quality education. This study also identifies the barriers in accessing education for the basic education students studying at non-governmental schools in armed conflict areas in Myanmar and what is the expectancy of non-governmental education leaders to overcome them.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study aimed to explore the actual experiences and expectations of non-governmental school leaders from Myanmar's armed conflict regions. This study was conducted using critical ethnographic methodology as the purpose of the study was to imagine the possible solutions to minimize the negative impacts of the civil war on the access to education of the students in the armed conflict areas. Critical ethnographic research methodology is used "for the emancipation of groups marginalized in our society" (Creswell, 2012, p. 467).

Interview questions were prepared in advance according to the objectives of the study. As the data collection method was the semi-structured interview, the interview guideline was also prepared and thoroughly reviewed by a supervisor to check their relevance. In order to conduct the interviews, an ethical approval was requested to Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee. The potential participants were purposefully selected according to their working locations, years of experience, academic and professional backgrounds. Initially, five principals and teachers from the non-government schools in different conflict areas were to be interviewed. However, the ethical approval was granted at the time of the coup in Myanmar, which limited the communication and access to people. Eventually, two education leaders were available to be interviewed. The participant from Kachin State was a principal and the participant from Shan State worked for a civil society organisation, which works with non-governmental schools in Shan State.

The interview questions were sent to the participants before they participated in separate interviews. The interviews were carried out via Zoom video conferencing software, and each interview took about an hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then the transcripts were sent to the participants to check the accuracy. The data from the transcript was analysed through the following procedure. Firstly, the raw data from the transcript was cleaned removing unnecessary parts and manually categorised, coded and counted. The results were eventually summarised according to the original structure of the interview in relation to the research questions.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. Background of schools

There are similarities and differences between the schools from two different areas. In terms of similarities, they all are situated in armed conflict areas in Myanmar and supported by different non-governmental organisations. Another similarity is that; both the schools are in the states neighbouring with foreign countries. Shan State is neighbouring with Thailand, Laos and China while Kachin State is neighbouring with India and China. Therefore, it is not very difficult for the people from the states to migrate to neighbouring countries illegally.

In terms of differences, the schools used different types of curriculums. In Shan State, the schools use a combination of government curriculum and their own curriculum. Currently, the organisation interviewed for this study is working on having their own curriculum in their own language, whilst the school in Kachin used their own curriculum and is currently working on adjusting their curriculum to be relevant to the General Educational Development (GED) test, which is the most broadly accepted form of another secondary certification in the United States of America nowadays (Smith, 2003). Moreover, the schools in Shan States are supported by a non-governmental organisation (NGOs) while the school in Kachin State is mainly backed by religion-based organisation named Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC). As they are in armed conflict areas, they all have to deal with the students for the families of internally displace people (IDP). In terms of the students moving to higher education, the students from Kachin School go to India for their higher education while for those in Shan State is uncertain due to lack of information.

4.1.2. Challenges

The challenges the school leaders in Kachin State and Shan State in Myanmar are facing are the lack of qualified teachers, the curriculum and use of languages, the lack of physical resources and the high dropout rate. Despite the challenges that are categorised in different subtopics, they all are interconnected.

Human resource challenges. One of the most significant challenges the school leaders are facing is lack of qualified teachers. The participant from Shan State stated that there are around 130 teachers teaching over 6,000 middle school students in her schools. The challenge they are facing in terms of human resources is not only the number of teachers but also the quality of teachers. It is one of the common challenges that schools in armed conflict areas around the world face (AlMunifi & Aleryani, 2021; Jones & Naylor, 2014; Kossingou et al., 2020). The teachers working in the schools are the alumni of the schools and they are not qualified enough compared to the expected criteria. And most of the teachers are volunteer teachers.

Most of the teachers, especially at monastic education schools, are the alumni of the schools. They should be learning a higher education. However, in reality, they have to teach poor education they received to the younger students. (The Participant from Shan State)

There are several reasons that prevent the leaders from having qualified teachers. The first one is the security issue. Similar to what Jones and Naylor (2014) have mentioned, teachers do not want to go to the areas with ongoing conflicts for security concern. The security issues include not only threats like robbery and death but also cases such as rape. Another factor that discourages the teachers is lack of basic infrastructure. Most of the schools in armed conflict areas are remote with inaccessible roads especially during rainy season. Similarly, it is difficult to have access to basic needs such as internet and options to choose food. For these reasons, it is really challenging for the leaders in armed conflict areas to have sufficient teachers with sufficient quality for the students in that area.

The conflict between/among languages. Another challenge the school leaders have to deal with is the language barrier, which can also be found in the literature (Le, 2021). For primary and middle school levels, all the textbooks except English textbooks are written in Burmese. However, Burmese is also the second language for the ethnic children, and they have to carry the burden of learning new knowledge via a language they are not familiar with. For the students from a non-Burmese speaking background, it is also a huge challenge (Richards et al., 2021). The students are to learn the subjects using the medium language they do not understand since the beginning of their education journey. As a consequence, the students feel

education is something they do not understand and start thinking that education is meaningless for them. Therefore, many of them have decided to drop out and try to get a job for income.

... Rote learning is everywhere. According to our data, we have found out that the students do not understand what they have learnt at school. The higher the year they attend, the stronger the thought that education is useless to them. ... (The participant from Shan State)

The language barrier is not only for the curriculum and syllabuses, but also for the communication between the students and teachers. Due to lack of teachers, every possibly available teacher is tasked to teach although many of them are not familiar with the ethnic language. When the teachers do not speak the ethnic language, they use Burmese as the medium language resulting to a communication gap between students and the teacher. In addition, teachers from rote learning culture teach and train students following the same culture limiting students critical thinking and practical learning applicable for application in their lives.

In terms of language, Burmese is not only a barrier for the students, but also a symbol to provoke their trauma.

... Most of the students suffer from the impacts of civil war. They hate war and they have traumata of civil war. It is inappropriate to say but they (the students) are angry when they have to learn Burmese (which is the official language of the government military). We also try our best to recover the students from the traumata ... (The participant from Kachin State)

The students are more familiar with the combatants from EAOs or even their family members could be the combatants while their enemies are government soldiers speak Burmese.

Physical resources. Another common challenge the leaders have to deal with is lack of infrastructure and financial resources. Most of the schools are in the remote areas and the access to basic infrastructure is very limited not only for teachers but also for students. The schools have very limited space, and the teachers have to teach different classes in a small room. Moreover, it is difficult for the communities to take responsibility for the needs of the schools in their areas as they do not receive support from the government (Lwin, 2021). In addition, even access to basic infrastructure like roads, classrooms and toilets is still a

challenge. It is too far for the students and the teachers to have access to internet. Therefore, learning online is not a realistic strategy for the students in conflict areas.

Another challenge in rural area is access to telecommunications infrastructure. For example, during the COVID pandemic, the children in cities can learn online however, the students in rural areas are running around to be safe from armed conflicts and battles. (The participant from Shan State)

The challenge of resources is not only for the infrastructure but also for the financial requirements. Teachers from the self-help schools in Shan State do not have fixed standard salary and the amount of salary they receive is quite low. Therefore, it can be understood that many people seek to get a job for a better income rather than devoting their time in education field.

... teachers, especially in self-help schools, do you not have regular salary. The amount of their salary depends on the annual budget of the school. I don't even want to call it salary, it should be called honorarium. ... (The participant from Shan State)

Similarly, the school principal from Kachin State also mentioned that financial issue is one of the significant issues they deal with.

High dropout rate. Due to institutional challenges faced by the schools and the pressures from the community, the students are encouraged to leave the school before they finish their high school, especially when they age enough to work. The students from Shan State leave the school when they reach Grade 7 or 8 or before the high school. One of the factors that encourages the students to leave the schools is their own parents.

It is related to economic situation of the families. They (the parents) do not encourage the children's education and make the children go to work. Some children even leave the school after Grade 4. The children cannot go to school even they want to if parents do not encourage to do so. (The participant from Shan State)

It is also a common challenge for the school from Kachin State. It is common for the students from Shan State to go to Thailand while the students from Kachin State go to China for work. However, poverty is not only a reason for the students to leave the school. It is also common in both states that some students leave school and join the EAOs. To understand how closed the students can be to the EAOs, the participant shared:

... We have been taking part in the resistance for more than 60 years. There is at least one resister in every family. ... (The participant from Kachin State)

4.1.3. Solving the Challenges

Despite many challenges, the leaders do not wait for the situation becomes better. Rather, they work hard as much as possible doing whatever they can do to alter the situations positively. They cannot fix all the problems; however, they can minimise the impacts of some challenges they have to deal with. The methods they are trying to overcome the challenges are categorised into four sub-themes: solutions for human resource development, solutions for curriculum and language, solutions for financial resources and the solutions to reduce the drop-out rate.

Strategies to solve human resource challenges. To improve the quality of the local teachers, the leaders invite experts and scholars, and have trainings for the teachers. The periods of trainings vary depending on the type of training, from two days to several weeks depending on what the training is about. For example, child psychology, introduction to curriculum and teacher training. The scholars or experts can be either from local organisations or from the organisations from neighbouring countries like Thailand. For the school in Kachin State, they even have some teachers who have studied abroad and returned to the school.

We have short courses to upgrade the skills of our teachers every year. They can take fifteen days to one month. ... One good thing to be glad is that we now have one teacher who completed Master of Education ... and another with the specialisation in curriculum from Thailand. (The participant from Kachin State)

Initiatives to solve curriculum and language issue. As the national curriculum is not relevant to students in the areas, the schools in Shan State are trying to develop their own curriculum in their own language, Shan. When the interview was taken, they were working on the curriculum for primary school level.

... We are developing a curriculum with our mother tongue. We have to work on textbooks, teaching aids and other things like story books as well as different types of teacher development trainings. ... (The participant from Shan State)

In terms of curriculum and the medium of instruction, the language medium of Kachin school is English and the school does not use the Myanmar's National Curriculum. It has a connection with a Mission School in Manipur State in India. Before 2020, the students who

passed Grade 10 from Kachin School sat an entrance exam at the Mission School in Manipur State, India and can then continue their education to higher levels. In addition, the students from the school can now sit the General Educational Development (GED) exam.

... We had a chance to attend a seminar related to GED in Bangkok. At the moment, we are running a program at our school for GED exam. ... (The participant from Kachin State)

Solutions to financial resources issue. All the schools from both states rely on donations for their survival. However, the types of donor they rely on are different. The schools from Shan state rely on two types of donors; NGOs and INGOs, and people from Shan State who are working in foreign countries. However, there are too many schools sharing a portion on the main funds thereby creating insufficient funds to meet their institutional requirements. They believe it is still the responsibility of the government.

... Actually, this is the responsibility of the government, but now, we are relying on other countries and we don't think it is appropriate. ... (The participant from Shan State)

The school from Kachin State has different ways to raise their financial resources. First, they collect fees from students. However, the amount of money collected from parents is insufficient to run the school. There are also many parents who cannot afford the school fees. Like the schools from Shan State, there are some personal donors for the school in Kachin State. Some of the donors are from Hpakant, the township which is famous for Jade production in KIA's control area. The teachers from the school have tours to contact the people from the Jade Land explaining their activities and their needs. There are also some Kachin ethnic people who are abroad supporting them as personal donors. The school also asks supports from Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), which is the umbrella organization of Kachin Independence Army (KIA), as well.

Until now, it is a huge challenge to support of the teachers for their living. If someone asks if we have sufficient resource for that, I will say 'No'. But we are trying our best. (The participant from Kachin State)

Programs to reduce the dropout rate. Schools are implementing two programs to prevent increase in dropout rate. Ironically, the COVID-19 prevented the increase in the dropout rate in the Kachin State. Due to the pandemic, the Chinese government built a wall along the border and guarded the border more strictly. Therefore, it is difficult for the people from the schools to get into China. In addition, the principal explained awareness programs in IDP camps.

There, parents, teachers and the teenagers have opportunities to learn about common emotions and feelings according to their genders. We the teachers make necessary adjustments according to their emotion and psychological condition so that they can concentrate on their study and very few leave the school this year. (The participant from Kachin State)

However, the participant did not provide detailed explanation about the connection between dropout rate and the awareness programs.

4.1.4. Opportunities they seek

While there are several things they can manage, there are also opportunities they are seeking. They need opportunities to have relevant human resources, relevant curriculum and people who really understand the situations in ethnic minority areas at the decision-making levels.

Opportunities for relevant human resource. Shan State wants to have relevant human resources, which they can start with the teacher training in colleges. The teachers, who are supposed to work in ethnic minorities areas, are expected to have knowledge about the areas in addition to subject content knowledge.

I think the first places to make changes are education colleges. ... Teachers who are going to work in the ethnic minorities' areas should know not only teaching techniques but also the situation of that ethnicity. (The participant from Shan State)

Opportunities for curriculum. Another opportunity the participant from Shan State mentioned is to have a relevant learning system through mother tongue in the primary school level.

The education system is not relevant for the children so that they cannot learn effectively.... The children should be taught in their mother tongue. (The participant from Shan State)

Moreover, she stated that people who really understand the education issues in ethnic minorities areas at the management levels are needed so that the problems occurring in the armed conflict areas may be minimised. Moreover, she added that township level management should have authority to make decisions rather than waiting orders and instructions from the higher levels.

There should be people who understand education issues in ethnic minorities areas. ... Township level officials must be allowed to make decision and there must be people representing ethnic groups at the decision-making levels. (The participant from Shan State)

4.2. Discussion

The aim of this study is to explore the challenges and the expectations of non-governmental leaders to improve education quality for the basic education students in the armed conflict areas in Myanmar. There are three major findings in this study: challenges faced by the leaders at non-governmental schools in conflict areas in Myanmar; the strategies they used to overcome the challenges; and the opportunities they are looking forward for the betterment of education within the region.

In terms of the challenges, the school leaders in Kachin State and Shan State in Myanmar are facing lack of qualified teachers, the curriculum and use of languages, the lack of physical resources and high dropout rate. Although the challenges are in different themes, they all are interconnected. Most of them are commonly found in the literature not only in Myanmar's context but also in the conflict affected territories all around the globe. The lack of sufficient number of qualified teachers is one of the common challenges of education leaders from armed conflict areas (Berker, 2014; Davis, 2010; Merrouche, 2011; Shanks, 2019). Like any other education leaders from the armed conflict areas all around the globe, the education leaders from Kachin State and Shan State are dealing with this challenge through close monitoring and working with experts and scholars to provide trainings for the local teachers. The scholars can be either from local organisations or from the organisations from neighbouring countries.

The significant root causes of the lack of the qualified human resources found in this study are the lack of security and the lack of basic infrastructure. While fulfilling the basic infrastructure for the area is not probable within a short period of time, the challenge of security can only be solved through assurance from both armed organisations. For example, along with the identification, the teacher should be allowed to travel to schools with assurance of security from both armed organisations. Although this recommendation still requires further studies on the proper implementation procedures, the assurance of security alone can give confidence to qualified teachers to get employed in the armed conflict areas. This challenge can only be solved at the local level following the consensus of opposing armed organisations.

The language barrier among students with non-Burmese speaking background induced rote learning culture among the students. In terms of curriculum and language barrier, the education leaders from two different states used different methods. A curriculum in which own ethnic language is used as the medium is being developed in Shan State while the school in Kachin state adapted the GED curriculum, which may not be fully relevant to the local context due to its failure to reflect the local context and fulfil the needs of the respective community. Despite the recognition of international universities on GED, it highlights the gap that not every student is able to go abroad for their further education and take the GED exam after high school. In addition, GED is a very American-based test, which reliance on international certifications disallow access, especially from the low social economic backgrounds. Despite the fact that it serves as a stepping stone to international education, in the long run, the curriculum content must be contextualized to service the needs of the local industries and communities. Curriculum designers and policy makers at the national level must remain sensitive to the inclusion of all ethnic children and their current status in the further study and development of the school curriculum.

To supplement the lack of financial resources, all schools from both states rely heavily on donations. This is also a common issue for school leaders in armed conflict areas (Berker, 2014; Davis, 2010; Merrouche, 2011; Shanks, 2019). However, this pressing problem cannot be solved within a short period of time. Since the support from donations is insufficient to cover the institutional expenditures, the setting of annual budget publicly to enhance transparency can boost confidence and trust among donors. Similarly, the school can also implement income generating programs. For example, the school can request the use of a lake

from the local authority for fish, poultry and agricultural produce that can be sold for profits in cooperation with the local farmers. This can also create job opportunities for the local community specially students dropping out from schools to find jobs. This requires coordination and participation from local authority, the public and school.

With the students dropping out of high school, poverty is not the sole reason. In both regions, it is common that students leave school to join the EAOs they have close connection with. To minimise the drop-out rate, the participant from Kachin State mentioned that the awareness programs are helpful. These programs coupled with implementation of learning environment that stirs their socio-psychological conditions enhance the behaviour of the students and encourage them to continue their education. However, further research is needed to build concrete empirical evidence on the effectiveness of these programs. In addition, whether the students who joined the EAOs were given opportunities to continue their education, is also a knowledge gap that requires further research.

The education leaders aim to have sufficient human resources, relevant curriculum and support from people who really understand the situations in ethnic minority areas. The participant from Shan State believes that colleges must train pre-service teachers to acquire knowledge about ethnic minorities areas, including the local languages, in addition to subject content knowledge. These education leaders also expect a relevant learning system through mother tongue in the primary school level because the current curriculum in Myanmar is not inclusive to the non-Burmese students in armed conflict areas.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study focused on the experiences of the non-governmental education leaders in armed conflict areas in Myanmar. Despite the findings not generalised in all the context, they highlight that the urgent need to take actions to minimise the educational problems faced by the students in armed conflict areas. With the current situation, cooperation between the state and non-state stakeholders is urgently needed to provide access to quality education. Policy makers should review the national education policy and the curriculum to become inclusive for all students including students in the armed conflict regions. It is imperative that EAOs and Government Military respect the right to education by providing opportunities and secured safe places for children. On the other hand, the school leaders should be prepared to provide

students with opportunities for further education highlighting the role of locally relevant curriculum for long-term sustainability.

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